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ABSTRACT

Sixteen underachieving gifted students at Oliver High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were identified for a pilot program called Project Inspire, which sought to improve student achievement and build self-esteem, especially for disadvantaged Afro-American students. Teachers were selected as mentors for the students, and the mentors were trained in causes of underachievement and motivational strategies. Teachers/mentors and students took part in self-esteem, motivational, and goal-setting exercises. Tutoring sessions were arranged, and a reward system was introduced. Based on students' comments during interviews following the program's implementation, Project Inspire has been successful in accomplishing its goals. Recommendations are offered for program improvement. (JDD)

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PROJECT INSPIRE: AN INTERVENTION FOR UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED STUDENTS

Frank M. Ribich
William P. Barone

When education makes the headlines, it is usually disastrous news - American students score at the bottom among industrialized nations in science, mathematics or writing! Underachieving has become one of our favorite educational "buzz" words. Yet it is true that at least a third of our gifted population is "cruising" through high school with little direction, motivation, or academic success to show for all those years in school. In some areas, as high as 15% give up and drop out.

In the inner city the problem of underachievement is particularly acute for the economically disadvantaged, many of whom are Afro-Americans. In Pittsburgh, where Afro-Americans are nearly 50% of the secondary population, they represent only 18% of the gifted population.

Three years ago, the Pittsburgh Board of Education's secondary gifted program, Centers for Advanced Study (CAS), began a collaboration with Duquesne University to address these problems. In the first year, groups of 12 to 16 underachieving CAS students were identified in the eight high schools which offered the CAS program. Underachievers were defined as:

a. Students who could not maintain a B average in their CAS classes and had to drop back to the mainstream level, or

b. Students who had such low grades in grade 8 that they were not eligible for gifted classes in grade 9.

All of these underachievers had been identified as gifted according to Pennsylvania Standards: they had, at one time, scored in the 7th, 8th, or 9th stanine in both reading and mathematics on the California Achievement Test, earned honor grades, and had an IQ of at least 125 on an individual psychological evaluation.

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Two Duquesne researchers, Drs. William Barone and Frank Ribich, used the focus group interview technique to gain insight and data on these young people's experiences. The same protocol was used for each group interview which was video-taped for later analysis. Students were asked questions about their self-perceptions, their relations with their peers, their good and bad experiences in education over the years, and the reasons for their poor academic performances.

In the second year of the collaboration, using the same research construct, Barone and Ribich interviewed groups of achieving students in the eight CAS programs. Their purpose was to compare the perceptions and experiences of the achievers with those of the underachievers. As a result of the tentative conclusions drawn from the data, the School District submitted a proposal to the Henry C. Frick Educational Commission for a $10,000 grant in order to pilot a number of intervention strategies. Oliver High School, located in one of Pittsburgh's most economically depressed areas, was selected as the program site.

"Project Inspire."

Sixteen underachieving students were identified for the pilot project.. Pre and post 'focus group' interviews were conducted with the students enrolled in Project Inspire as a means of assessing the participants' attitudes and perceptions of the CAS experience. Responses were classified according to the focus group construct which provided the framework for the concepts explored during the interviews. The analyses of the pre-interview conducted in December, 1988 and the post-interview conducted in December, 1989 reflect the students' attitudes and perceptions of the CAS program prior to the intervention of Project Inspire and their reaction to the project after intervention had been implemented for a period of approximately two semesters.

Participant comments recorded during the pre 'focus group' interview reveal a cynical and jaded view of the CAS program, teachers, homework, achieving peers and the possibility that anything in their lives could change. Their statements reflected a depreciated self-concept and a sense of despair and hopelessness about the future. Several of the senior students were quick to point out the cycle of failure that gripped their lives and which would certainly be replicated by the younger class members. In the pre-interview, upperclassmen indicated that underclass underachievers would more than likely pursue a path similar to their own. In their view there was little hope of any significant behavioral change on the part of these students or on the part of school personnel. In the pre-focus group interview a junior student said, "You will turn out to be just like us. We were like you in 9th grade. You will be like us in 10th grade. Nothing is going to change." In the post-focus group interview that same student said, "With some help, some things can change. The mentor can help. I'm looking forward to graduating and finding a college that will accept me."

Based upon data gathered in the previous two years, the following intervention strategies were introduced in "Project Inspire":

- Six teachers were selected who agreed to serve as mentors for the Project Inspire students.

- Three school psychologists were enlisted to meet with the group of teacher-mentors to discuss characteristics of the gifted child, causes of underachievement, and strategies for conferencing with and motivating the students.

- A two day leadership camp was set-up where students and teachers took part in self-esteem, motivational, and goal setting exercises.

- Weekly meetings with students were arranged by the teacher-mentors to discuss problems and monitor academic progress.

- Tutoring sessions were arranged by the CAS Facilitator, Phyllis Berkovitz. Mathematics was the biggest obstacle for several students.

- A reward system was introduced. Students who made honor roll were given a gift or cash prize and all of the students were taken on a ski outing.

Overall, the foregoing interventions appear to be having a positive effect on the students who are participating in Project Inspire. The goals of the project were to improve student achievement and build self-esteem. Judging from the students' comments recorded during the post-focus group interview, Project Inspire has been successful in accomplishing its goals.

Analysis of comments from the post-focus group interview, conducted one year later, revealed that students generally felt much more positive toward schooling and the CAS program. Specifically, upperclass students' attitudes shifted from hopelessness and despair to cautious optimism. Four students in the original group had transferred to other schools and two were doing well in the new school setting. Of the 12 students who remained at Oliver, all made some improvement in their grades and four attained high honor. One senior enlisted in the armed service; the other three were in the process of applying to college.

Project Inspire seemed to help upperclass students clarify their goals and to implement action plans to achieve those goals. For example, in the previous year, a junior student spoke disparagingly of fellow students who were planning for the future. He thought that they had "no life." There were opportunities that they were missing. His notion of future centered on a full-time job and his social life. After a year of "Project Inspire," however, he has experienced some academic success and openly discussed his plans to attend college. In concert with his mentor, he had identified a college that he considered to be "good" and one that would accept him in spite of his previous academic deficiencies. This young person was in the process of completing college applications and was actively exploring various financial options.

Significant changes seem to have occurred in regard to the upperclassmen's notion of possibilities for underclassmen concerning their general attitude toward schooling and setting goals for the future. Generally, grades improved and there was a more favorable attitude toward attending school.

The researchers recommended that Project Inspire continue with the following recommendations:

1. Continue training for mentors.
2. Increase personal contact time between members, teachers, and students.
3. Continue the recognition and reward system for student achievement.
4. Introduce a flexible placement strategy which exploits student aptitude.

Additionally, the researchers recommended the introduction three new components:

1. The use of non-traditional approaches to identifying more disadvantaged gifted, particularly Afro-Americans. Work by such researchers as Torrence, Feldhusen, Maker, Renzulli, and others suggest alternative identification options that should be tried.

2. Earlier intervention, specifically during the difficult transition from middle school to high school. Students across the city said that they experienced the most painful frustration, loneliness and failure in grade nine.

3. Establishment of a regional, university Gifted Center to continue research, to offer college experiences to gifted students, and to provide inservice for a cadre of teachers in effective teaching and mentoring strategies so they can turn their underachieving students into achievers in classrooms throughout the city.

Funding for "Project Inspire" was renewed for the second year by the Henry C. Frick Educational Commission, and it is currently in operation at Oliver High School. Some of the concepts in the Project are already being implemented in other high schools throughout the City of Pittsburgh, and the program is being considered as a pilot for the CAS program city wide.

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